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ABSTRACT

Part of a three-volume series, this guide is intended for parents of young children of preschool through kindergarten age. The purpose of the guide is to provide ideas and activities to help in the development of various basic skill areas which will be important for children's later success in school. Discussion focuses on the child's self concept, discipline, the learning environment at home, language development, listening skills, motor development, pre-reading, numbers, and thinking skills. Accompanying each section are a number of activities and references for further reading. Beyond recommending specific activities, however, the purpose of this booklet is to convey the attitude that parents can provide an environment for their children that is rich in learning potential, that does not require a degree in education, and that does not cost a fortune. Included is a four-page bibliography. (RH)

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LEARNING IS A FAMILY AFFAIR : A Guide for Parents of Young Children

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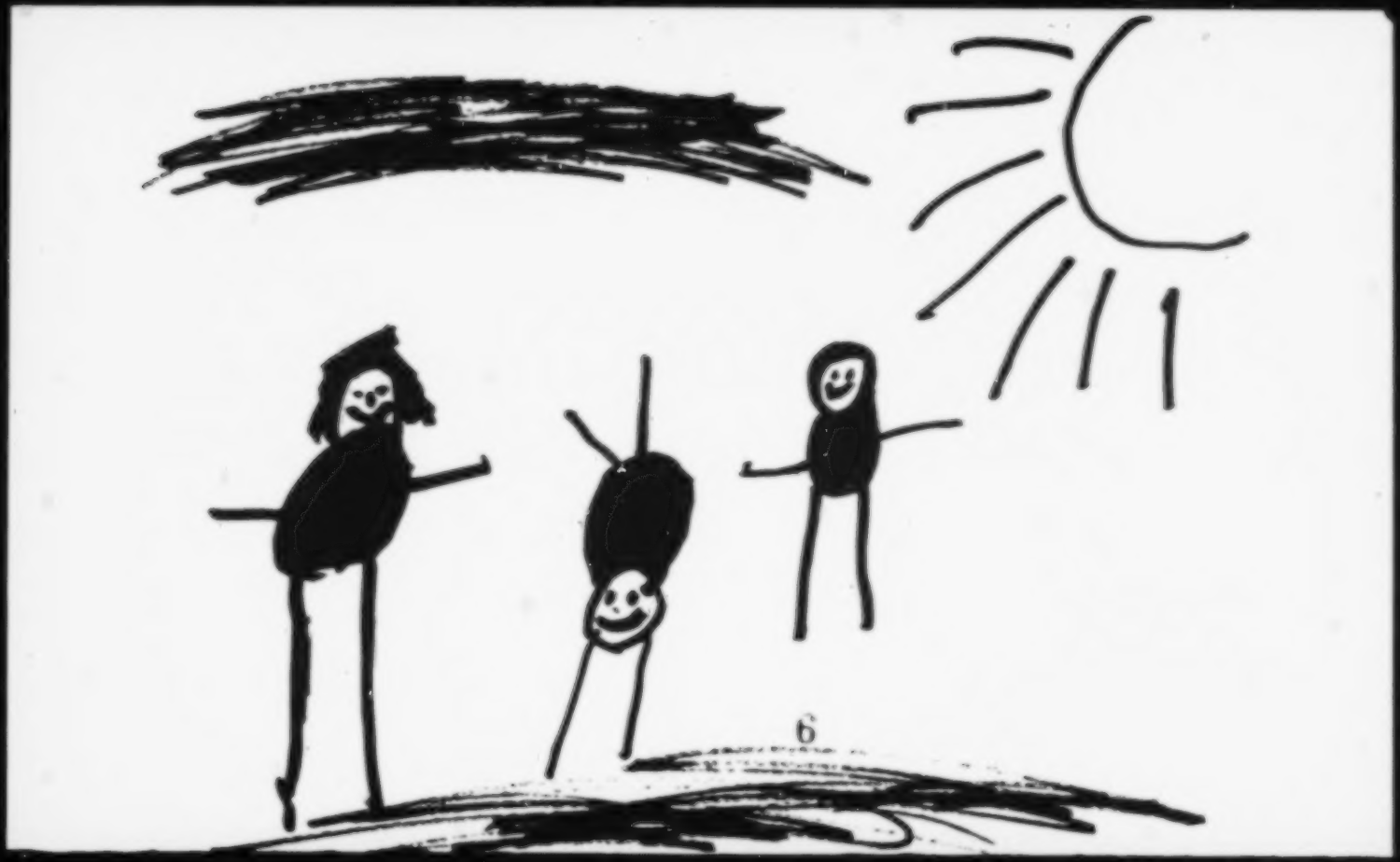
THANKS

Learning is a Family Affair : A Guide for Parents of Young Children was produced by the Maine Department of Educational and Cultural Services for parents who want to become involved in their children's education. It is designed to help parents understand and encourage their young children's growth and development. We hope you and your child will enjoy some of the simple, around-the-house activities we've suggested to help your child prepare for the demands of school. For more information, contact your local school or the Department of Educational and Cultural Services.

This guide is part of a three-volume series accompanying seven public service announcements broadcast by Maine's commercial television stations in the fall of 1984. Other volumes in the series are: Learning is a Family Affair: A Guide for Parents of Children in Grades 1-6 and Learning is a Family Affair: A Guide for Parents of Students in Grades 7-12. This project was inspired by Deputy Associate Commissioner of Education Caroline Sturtevant, and owes special thanks to her and to Linda McGuire, Charlene Preble, Brud Maxcy, Jim Abbott, and Joseph Pecoraro for their help and encouragement over many months. Most of all, the project owes its success to Cheri Allen and Charlotte Sawtelle, who contributed far more than any of us expected them to.

Nini McManamy
Project Coordinator



Introduction

This booklet is intended for you if you are parents of young children, pre-school through kindergarten age. Its purpose is to provide you with ideas and activities to help in the development of various basic skill areas which will be important for your children's later success in school.

There are a number of activities and references for further reading in each section. These are not intended to make you feel obligated to try each one but, rather, to give you a feel for the types of activities which are valuable and appropriate for young children. You may pick and choose, create your own activities, or do further reading to get additional ideas.

More than specific activities, though, the purpose of this booklet is to convey an attitude - an attitude that you can do it! You can provide an environment for your children that is rich in learning potential. You can do it without a degree in education, and you can do it without spending a fortune. And, it can be fun!

Cheri Allen

SELF-CONCEPT

The way your children see themselves--their self-concept--will have more influence upon them than any other single factor. It affects all aspects of their lives: how they act, how others react to them, and how they view the world. Research is showing us that children's self-images can actually have a greater impact[1] than intelligence upon their school achievement.

Your children develop their self-concepts through all of the different experiences that they have with people and with things. If most of these experiences are positive, they come to think of themselves as capable, competent, worthwhile, and likable individuals. This kind of confidence helps children to accept challenges and to learn more and more difficult tasks. On the other hand, if their experiences are generally negative, they may develop doubts and fears about their ability to be successful. They may come to see themselves as people who are not likable or capable. Children who have difficulty, constantly face failure, or expect to be failures, often become afraid of trying new things.

Parents can have a tremendous amount of influence upon their children's feelings about themselves. Families who view their children positively, demonstrate confidence in them, and act supportively go a long way toward helping their children feel positive about themselves.

One way to do this is to encourage independence. The more children are allowed to do on their own - putting together a puzzle, making something, dressing themselves, helping around the house, gardening, pouring their own juice, or sponging up their spills - the more capable they

will feel. As a parent you can offer experiences at a level that will provide some challenge to them, but also at a level where they will experience success. You may find it necessary to break some tasks down into smaller steps, or you may suggest ways to simplify a task, but avoid the temptation to take over. Children learn by doing, not by watching us do. Even though we might take over a task with the best of intentions, the message that comes through to our children is our doubt in their ability.

Obviously, if you are encouraging your children to do things on their own, there will be more mistakes made than if you do things yourself. But by doing and experiencing, your children are learning. And your attitude toward mistakes can influence theirs. Some children become afraid of trying anything new for fear of making a mistake; other children learn to take their mistakes in stride and to try to learn from them. Not only what we say to our children, but also how we act influences them. They learn how we truly feel about mistakes by observing our reactions to our own mistakes.

Feelings of being worthwhile and capable are central to a strong self-concept. It is important for children to understand that they are lovable and capable regardless of their accomplishments: you will not withdraw your love for your daughter because she is no longer the fastest runner on the block, and you will not stop loving your son because he did not get an A on his report card.

Feedback to children, both praise and criticism, should be specific and focus upon the act rather than upon their value as human beings. For example, if your children wipe their feet before entering the house, thank them for wiping their feet rather than saying "good boy" or

"good girl." If they track mud in the house, tell them you are upset and tell them why, but do not call them "slobs." For excellent explanations and specific examples of this approach, see the monthly publication, Growing Child and the book, How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk (see the Recommended Reading and Bibliography.)

Another important aspect in the development of self-concept is the way we deal with our children's feelings. Children often state feelings that we do not like to hear. For example, your child arrives home from a friend's house, obviously upset, and announces, "I hate Matthew. I'm never ever going to play with him again!" Frequently we argue with our children, telling them that they do not really feel the way they claim they do, and then telling them how they should feel: "That's not true. You know that Matthew is your favorite friend and you love him very much. I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk."

With this method we often teach our children that we do not understand them, that they should not trust their feelings, and that they need to be dependent upon our judgment rather than to develop their own judgment and to trust themselves. We also teach them not to express their feelings to us.

Instead, we can listen to what our children are saying, and acknowledge their feelings (this does not have to imply agreement): "You sound like you are really angry with Matthew," or "You must be feeling really frustrated." It's amazing the way children can calm down, talk things out, and often even manage to come up with their own resolutions. "Yeah, he's being really mean. He won't share any of his toys and he keeps grabbing them away from me. I think I'll take my own blocks over and try

again." This type of approach is developed very well and explained in practical, concrete, and workable terms in the book How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk.

In Summary

The importance of positive self-concept cannot be stressed enough. See that your family environment provides support and respect, shows confidence, and demonstrates positive feelings toward your children. Allow your children to act independently and to have many experiences, but try to see that these experiences are at the appropriate level of difficulty so that your children will have success. Teach your children that it is okay to make mistakes. Give them specific feedback about their actions rather than general praise or criticism, and help them to recognize that their value as human beings is independent of their accomplishments. Help them to recognize, to trust, and to understand their own feelings, and help guide them toward learning to resolve their own conflicts. Above all, demonstrate your willingness to communicate, to understand, and to be supportive.

Recommended reading: How to Discipline with Love, Children: The Challenge, How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk, Between Parent and Child, Growing Child, Growing Parent, and Learn at Home the Sesame Street Way.

DISCIPLINE

Discipline is a word that means entirely different things to different people. There are variations in philosophy from extremes in punishment to extremes in leniency. Every family has different rules and expectations, and different ways of enforcing them.

But as we define our own style of discipline in each of our homes, we do need to question just what it is that we are trying to accomplish, short term and long term, and we need to examine whether or not our methods are moving us in those directions. Is our discipline directed at "showing who's boss," or is it directed at developing individuals who are in control of their own actions and accept the responsibility and results of those actions? Most of us probably want some combination of these approaches: we recognize the necessity for us as parents to "be in charge," to set the ground rules and expectations, to make these clear, and to enforce them. But we probably also would agree that our ultimate goal is not to be in charge but, rather, to help our children eventually develop self-discipline.

Often, the word discipline is used to mean punishment, but recent research on human behavior shows that punishment is not always the most effective way to bring about the behaviors or attitudes that we are trying to develop. Instead, we might view discipline as teaching, leading, guiding, or providing a set of attitudes and behaviors that a leader hopes a follower will want to acquire. Jennifer Birckmayer of Cornell University states in her booklet, Discipline...Is Not a Dirty Word, "A person who is a good disciplinarian with children has certain characteristics: a person whom children find interesting and full of good ideas; a person who makes rules and expectations clear and understandable; a person who demonstrates appropriate behavior through speech and manner."[2]

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We need to look at ways of preventing problem behavior in the first place, but when it does occur, we need to examine why. Are we engaging in a power struggle because we are inappropriately placing too many constraints on our children? Are they unhappy because they feel the only attention they can get is through misbehaving? Are there physical problems we are overlooking? Are we overlooking some fears or anxieties that are showing up as misbehavior? We constantly need to re-examine our own situations as our children grow and change.

There are many options open to us as we discipline our children. It helps to think about conflict in terms of "problem solving" instead of "showing who's boss." This can require a real shift in attitude, but can prove to be much more effective. Following are some alternatives that help to avoid or deal with conflict, that encourage growth, and that avoid some or all the negative effects associated with punishment.

o Offer children choices: choices that are appropriate for that child, and that you really do intend to honor. "Would you like orange juice or apple juice with your lunch?" Or, to the misbehaving child: "You have a choice. You may play quietly in this room with us, or you may go upstairs and make noise by yourself.... I see you've chosen to go upstairs. Would you like to go up on your own, or do you need my help?" This method can minimize conflict in many situations. At the same time, it develops responsibility and independence in your children. When children make choices and accept the consequences of their acts, the learning experience goes much further than any decision that is imposed upon them.

o Work with children instead of against them. Jennifer Birckmayer advises us, "Sometimes standing back and observing children and then figuring out with their help mutually acceptable ways for them to do what it is they are trying to do can turn a conflict into a pleasant (or at least tolerable) experience."[3]

This principle works with problems children might be experiencing, a conflict between you and your child, or a problem between friends or brothers and sisters. Rather than descending upon your children with ready answers, help guide them to think of possible solutions. It is amazing the creative - and often even fair - solutions that children can devise given the chance. This method helps children develop some problem solving ability, some idea of how to approach conflict when you are not around to hand out answers, and it also gives them some vested interest in making their solutions work.

For example, this approach can be used in the common situation of two children fighting over a toy. Instead of immediately telling them what to do about it, usually ordering one or both of them to share the toy, try asking them to each explain to the other what they see as the problem. Then ask them to come up with ideas for solutions. Be sure that the children are talking to each other and not to you. Try to limit your role to that of moderator - just keep things moving and on track. In the beginning, it might take a fair amount of guiding from you, but as they get the idea, your role can fade more and more into the background. In this example, a few of the possibilities of the children's solutions might be to work cooperatively with the toy, to play separately with different toys, to let one child finish a turn before the next one starts, or to use a timer for each person's turn.

o Think in terms of natural or logical consequences to acts rather than punishment. This can take some very creative thinking on your part to set up situations that require children to accept the responsibility for their own actions (as opposed either to being bailed out by their parents, or receiving punishment that is unrelated to the crime). For example, children who behave unacceptably in a particular situation are removed from that situation. If an older child consistently forgets to put the dirty clothes into the hamper, they do not get washed and the child wears dirty clothes. If the child consistently runs late, he/she misses some planned event. The advantages of this approach are that it provides real learning situations, develops responsibility, and is much more effective than punishment. Read Children: the Challenge, Raising a Responsible Child, or How to Discipline With Love for full explanations and workable suggestions concerning this approach.

o Do set limits, but make them fair, clearly understood, and consistent. Certain actions are simply unacceptable, and every family will define differently just what those actions are. As you enforce your limits, you can recognize your children's feelings while not accepting their actions, and you can maintain your authority calmly and consistently. Tell your children when they are doing something wrong, but be careful to describe the act or the problem and how you feel about it, and not to attack the children's characters. "It makes me very angry to find water all over the bathroom floor," as opposed to, "You always make such a mess!" It helps to then give your children a way to make amends. In this case, you might hand them a towel or sponge.

o Focus on what your children can do instead of on what they can't do. It is startling to most

parents to count the number of times they say "no" in a day - especially when you recognize what a dead end "no" is. When we overload our language with negatives, children either learn to ignore us, or they learn not to try anything because everything is too dangerous or off-limits. Whenever you must stop children from doing something, try to provide alternatives that they can do. Try to make it a learning experience. "You may not throw the blocks in the house - but you may stack them or make a design."

o Stop and think about your environment. If you catch yourself having to stop your children too often, examine your environment and question whether or not it is a safe and appropriate place for your children at their particular levels of development. Maybe some of those breakable antiques need to be put away for awhile; perhaps the low cupboards in the kitchen could contain safe pots, pans, and plastic containers, while dangerous or fragile items are moved to higher or locked cupboards. It is important for children to be curious and to explore because that is how they learn. Look at your expectations and decide if you are really expecting more mature behavior or more control than your children can achieve at this point.

o Model good behavior. This is the most obvious fact and always the easiest to ignore, but our children learn the most by what they observe, not by what they are told. If we expect our children to behave in certain ways, we must act in those ways ourselves.

o Be firm. Research is showing us that children are more likely to comply with expectations and demands when we are firm - not loud or mean or rough, but firm. Shouting, threats, and physical punishment may stop undesirable behavior for the moment, but they don't change it in the long run.[4]

o Spend time with your children just enjoying them. Special times that are fun and relaxing help to develop a strong relationship between you. Sometimes these can be things planned in advance, and sometimes these can be spontaneous, unpredictable moments.

In Summary

Remember that each child is an individual and responds differently to various kinds of discipline. You as a parent are also an individual, and you must devise methods of discipline that are consistent with your own values and personality. Think about your ultimate goals, and keep these in mind as you carry out your disciplinary plan. But also recognize that good communication, consistency, a feeling of respect, and a warm and loving environment are more important than any specific techniques you might use.

Recommended reading: Children: the Challenge, Raising a Responsible Child, How to Discipline with Love, How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk, Discipline...Is Not a Dirty Word, Between Parent and Child, Growing Child, and Growing Parent.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AT HOME

All too often we think of learning as something that occurs while children sit at a desk with books, pencils, and paper, and we overlook the crucial kinds of learning that a child is doing every waking minute.

Children are naturally curious. They are driven to explore, to experiment, and to try things. They are constantly taking in information through their movements and senses: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting. Children find the world a fascinating place, and it is through their experimentation, trial and error, observation, experiences, and active play that they learn.

What does this mean in terms of what you, as a parent, should be doing? It does not mean that you should sit down at the table and drill your children on some academic topic in order to feel that you are providing a good learning environment.

Instead, you might see your role more as that of a guide. The most important learning your children do is through their own experiences. You can provide an environment that is rich in potential for exploration and discovery, and then let your children do the work. You might help them at times, encouraging, answering questions or stimulating more questions. But view your role more as that of a consultant, an advisor, or a catalyst, rather than as a "teacher."

The monthly publication, Growing Child, describes it well:

> "What is your child doing right now? If he's not sleeping, he's learning. What's your part? A word here and there, some more scotch tape, a question, a piece of

> aluminum foil instead of paper to crayon on, conversation, a safety pin to hold a cape together. Noticing. Noticing that Kate's pretending to cook - would a little dough help out? Noticing that Ted is putting cars in separate piles - by color? by size? A shoebox makes a garage. Noticing that Sally has a pocketful of acorns. Enough to give one to each member of the family? Enough to fill a cup?
>
> Learning is not a plan-it-in-advance thing, not a sit-down-and-get-it-done-thing. At least not all the time.
>
> Start with what your child is already doing. Pick up the clues. Play it as it happens."[5]

Things you have around the house, or supplies that are relatively inexpensive are often the best learning materials: water, sand, clay (or homemade playdoh), paper, paints, crayons, magazines, photographs, laundry, boxes, jars, pots and pans, plants, string, tools, wood, buttons, and an area to run, jump, climb, and build. Learning tools are whatever you have in your house and your neighborhood. You do not need to spend a fortune in order to have a rich environment for learning.

Ordinary experiences are rich learning opportunities: taking a walk, going grocery shopping, going to the laundromat, reading a book, going to the library, or taking a trip to the zoo. No matter what they are doing, your children are busy soaking in information through all of their senses. You can make the most of this by asking questions, pointing out similarities and differences, listening and responding to your children, and playing games as you go.

When you do actually sit down to do an activity with your child, keep it short and fun. Watch your child for clues, both concerning the timing of activities, and the level of difficulty. Most tasks can be adjusted (with some imagination on your part!) either to be more challenging or simpler, in order to match your child's level at a particular time. Sometimes, breaking a task down into smaller steps, offering fewer choices, or making it more concrete can simplify a task enough for a child to do it.

It is important to remember that individual children can vary tremendously in the way they learn things, the ages at which they learn things, and even the order in which they learn some tasks. Nevertheless, much learning does take place in a particular order. For example, one child may have a large vocabulary of words before taking his or her first step, while another child, equally bright, may walk long before speaking his or her first word. But in both cases, much language is taken in before that first word is spoken, and much muscle and balance development has gone on before the first step is taken. This is referred to as developmental order and is based upon the idea that much of learning is like building blocks: one step of learning forms the basis for the next step.

There are many excellent books for parents (see Recommended Reading and Bibliography) that can supply you with background information about what children typically do at various ages. Within this framework, if you closely observe your own children, you can determine what they are ready for at a particular time. Attempting to teach children something before they are developmentally ready for it only results in failure and frustration. So, watch your children for clues as to their readiness, try to keep their experiences challenging but successful, and they will be hungry for more.

This same principle is especially important to remember if you are tempted to introduce academics to your young children. Many essential skills must be developed before your children are ready to read and write. When these academics are pushed on children who are not ready, it is not only frustrating but it is at the expense of other activities that they should be doing.

In Summary

Capitalize on your children's natural curiosity. Provide them with opportunities, stimulation, and encouragement. Take advantage of equipment you already have in your home (you do not need to spend a fortune, contrary to what advertising would have you believe) and take advantage of everyday experiences for learning. Try to adjust activities to the right level of difficulty for your children so that they provide both success and challenge. Try to see your role as a guide rather than as a teacher. Then, enjoy it!

Recommended reading: Workjobs...For Parents, Growing Child, Learn at Home the Sesame Street Way, Your Home Is Your Child's First School.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Children must acquire certain building blocks of learning before going on to another level. Parents are often very anxious for their children to be doing "real" learning - like reading and writing. If you stop and think about what must come first, you will realize that children cannot learn to read (at least not with any understanding) unless they have a good foundation in language. Written words are simply symbols that represent our language. Children will not ever develop good language without life experiences so that they know what the spoken words represent. Along with experiences, they must hear the language and take it all in for awhile (receptive language) before they can speak it (expressive language).

So good language development is crucial to later development in other academic areas. Learning to communicate well also relates to a positive self-concept.

What can you do as a parent? It is really the informal things you do that are the most important. Talk to your children, and really listen to what they have to say. Encourage them to ask questions and learn new words. The environment that you set up, and your desire to interact with your children will encourage language and make it enjoyable.

Research into language development is showing us that parents seem to be naturally sensitive to their children's levels of understanding, and that without even realizing it they make adjustments to match their children's levels and to encourage good language growth.[6] The important thing is to watch how your children are responding and to make appropriate variations. Do talk correctly, use full sentences, and avoid baby talk.

Following are some specific activities you can do to help encourage good language development.

o Read aloud. This stimulates your children's interest in language, and helps to develop their vocabularies and their use of language. Try for at least 15 minutes a day.

o Make sure your children have other language input: brothers and sisters, friends, and adults talking to older children, and adults talking to other adults.

o Provide a good example. Children learn language through what they hear. But developmental stages are also at work, and children will only select the information they are ready for at any given time. As frustrating as it can be for parents who want their children to learn to speak correctly, children typically go through certain progressions of speech patterns, and no amount of your correcting them will make any difference - except possibly to discourage them. So have faith that if you are using good language, your children will select from that at their own pace. If you can rephrase your children's errors in your responses so that you are modeling correct speech, go ahead. But try to avoid correcting as such.

A perfect example of this was quoted in the Sesame Street Parents' Newsletter:

> Child: "Nobody don't like me."
> Mother: "No, say 'Nobody likes me'".
> Child: "Nobody don't like me."
> (Eight repetitions of this dialogue)
> Mother: "No, now listen carefully. Say 'Nobody likes me.'"
> Child: "Oh! Nobody don't likes me."[7]

o Label. Teach your children the names of objects, people, places, and activities. Help them learn descriptive words: how things look, sound, feel, smell, and taste. As they get older, help them label their discoveries and new concepts.

o Describe and explain. Whatever you are doing, talk about it. Whether you are building something, washing the dishes, planning a trip, taking a walk, or grocery shopping, talk about what you are doing. And encourage your children to do the same: describe, explain, question, and discuss.

o Encourage discussion. Try to take time to listen when your children want to tell you about something. If you can't stop right then, make a point of doing it later. Try to provide opportunities for discussion. Make a good faith attempt to answer questions. If your first answer is not enough, try another. And, really listen. That can be hard because as parents we always have so many other things that we have to do, but it does pay off.

o Limit TV watching. Television does not provide the interaction that is needed, or in most cases, proper models. Discuss with your children the shows that you do watch together.

o Recast. One technique that has been found to be quite helpful in language development, and is also one that parents often do naturally, is called recasting. It is simply parents' tendency to respond to what children say by restating their words, but providing something additional. "Bird fly." "Yes, that bird is flying up in the sky."

o Make children communicate. Encourage them to express their desires, rather than anticipating what they are thinking or wanting.

o Tell stories - all kinds! Children love to hear stories about you and your childhood or other interesting experiences. You can tell traditional family tales or folk stories, or make up your own! Encourage your children to invent their own stories, or to participate in yours.

o Let your children tell their stories into a tape recorder, then listen to them. Or, write their stories as they dictate them, then let them do the illustrations.

o Teach your children some fingerplays or action songs. These can be especially helpful for teaching various concepts: up, down, halfway, open, shut; feelings: happy, angry, sad; actions: clapping, stamping; various body parts; and so on.

o Play language games like "What if?..": "What if an elephant lived in the closet?" or "I'm thinking of something. What is it?" Start with easy things, then work up to things that require more description.

For more information about language development and ideas of activities, see any of the following references:

Workjobs...For Parents, Growing Child, International Reading Association pamphlets and brochures, Learn at Home the Sesame Street Way, Talking with Your Child.

LISTENING SKILLS

Through careful listening, children learn to distinguish between sounds that are very different, and then gradually learn to hear the differences between sounds that are quite similar. This is important in their language development and later in reading.

There are many activities you and your children can do to encourage listening skills. Some of the best require no special materials, no planning, and can be done on the spur of the moment. They can be as brief as a few seconds or as long as your children's attention spans.

One of the most basic listening activities you can do is to listen to the sounds in your environment. This activity has countless variations and is a very easy one to do anywhere, anytime.

You can do it sitting in your favorite chair. Close your eyes and listen. Pick out the loudest, most obvious noises you hear: a truck going by, someone's footsteps upstairs, a dog barking. Pick out the quietest noises you hear: the clock ticking, wind blowing, your breathing.

Take a listening walk through the house. You might use blindfolds, or just have your chilldren close their eyes. Turn on different appliances, drop objects, scratch different surfaces, make as many different noises as you can. Make it a game, and take turns guessing what noise the other one is making. Or tape record the different noises then try to guess what they are.

The same game can be played outdoors. Focus on the different noises you hear: see who can be the first to hear a particular noise.

There are numerous other activities and games which encourage the development of listening skills. All kinds of records, music activities, and storybooks stimulate interest in listening.

If you have a tape recorder, use it to record your children's voices, then let them listen to the tape.

Encourage your children to imitate all sorts of noises that they hear. Try whispering sounds in your children's ears and have them make the sounds back to you.

Listen carefully to names or words, then play out their rhythm on drums (empty oatmeal containers make great drums). This can even be played as a guessing game.

You can make some sound boxes out of empty orange juice cans or small milk cartons. Make two each with contents such as rice, sand, salt, jingle bells, coins, or beans. Make contents of each pair identical. Tape up the tops, then let your children match the sets according to sound.

Play simple games such as "Simon Says," "Fruit Basket," and "Mother, May I," which require your children to pay attention to directions.

Following directions helps to develop listening skills and memory. First, just ask your children to perform one familiar task. Then gradually add another and another as they are able to remember longer lists of instructions. This might take the form of requests: "Please bring me the newspaper." "Please pick up your shoes, then bring me the newspaper." Or it can be a game: "Put one hand on your head, turn in a circle, then jump in the air."

Have your children deliver messages to other members of the family.

As your children are ready, you can play games to help them hear the similarities and differences in words and letters. "I'm thinking of a word that sounds like (rhymes with) head, and I sleep in it. What is it?" Or, "Let's name all the words we know that start with the same sound as bed."

As your children learn the sounds of different letters, try labeling grocery bags, each with a different letter. Let them sort some groceries into appropriate bags according to their first letter. Or play the same sorting game with small baskets or buckets and a collection of small toys. Label each container with a letter, and have your children sort the items accordingly (beads, balls, blocks, buttons, train, tape, top).

In Summary

The development of listening skills is an important part of language development. It is easy to incorporate fun listening games and activities into daily routines.

For more ideas, see the following references: How Can I Help My Child Get Ready to Read?, Learning at Home the Sesame Street Way, Your Home Is Your Child's First School, Talking with Your Child.

MOTOR DEVELOPMENT

Children learn by doing. Anyone who is around young children recognizes that unless they are sleeping, children are constantly moving, doing, and exploring. Several terms used to refer to this kind of learning are sensorimotor, which refers to the five body senses and motor (muscle) development working together; gross motor, which refers to the large muscles; and fine motor, which refers to the small muscles.

All of the information which children are so busy absorbing comes in through their body movement and their senses. It is a child's work during these early years to take it all in and to make some sense out of it. All later learning, including academics and higher abstract learning, depends upon this process having taken place first.

Before children are ever ready for reading or writing, a lot of experience must be gained in large muscle movement (jumping, running, climbing), then smaller muscle movement and coordination with the eyes (painting, clay, scissors). Children must develop a sense of where their bodies are in space, how their body parts move and relate to each other, and a feeling of left and right before they can apply these experiences in a finer sense to the location of words on a sheet of paper.

Actually, research is showing us that some children can be pushed to do some of the academic skills that they are not developmentally ready to do. There are real disadvantages to this, though. These skills are often learned as splinter skills: the child might be able to do a particular thing well, but does not have a good solid foundation in all of the skills that should have been mastered first. Sooner or later, this usually causes some difficulty. Additionally, the time spent doing the academic work is time taken away from the sensori-

motor activities that are more important for a child to be doing at this age. And it might take six months to teach too young a child a particular skill that would only take a few days to master when that child is developmentally ready to learn it.

Following are ideas of toys, materials, and activities that encourage motor development. Use your imagination and see the Bibliography to come up with many more ideas.

Large Muscle Development

Under the headings of large muscle or gross motor development come a number of different skills that must be developed. In the following list are activities that focus on coordination and strength; body awareness, including the body's position in space and the way various body parts work together; balance and other important reflexes; coordination of eye and arm movement; and the coordination of eye and foot movement. And, of course, most of them overlap. Very few activities of any sort deal purely with one skill area.

o Encourage the many types of movement that children do naturally, or even seem driven to do: spinning in circles, running, jumping, hopping, climbing, rolling, skipping, sliding, creeping, crawling, swinging, stretching, bending, turning, twisting.

o Take advantage of opportunities for outdoor play in your own backyard, a local playground, or schoolyard:

- all playground type equipment: bars, ladder, small low balance board (a 2x4 placed on bricks works nicely), swings, slides, climbers or jungle gyms.
- things to push, pull, climb and ride on: tricycle, wheelbarrow, wagon.

- sandbox or a dirt pile and shovels, buckets, plastic containers.
- large hollow blocks or large boxes (1/2 gallon milk cartons, taped and wrapped in grocery bags make great blocks).
- woodworking materials.
- balls, beanbags.
- any number of recycled materials: old tires, railroad ties.

o Try any of the following activities:

- toss a beanbag or ball into a target: a box, basket, bucket, or large circle of rope on the floor.
- throw, catch, roll, kick, hit, or bounce balls.
- "paint" the fence, driveway, or side of the house with water and large paintbrushes.
- pound nails into boards (with supervision).
- pound clay.
- place a length of rope on the floor in various patterns: straight line, zigzag, curvy. Have children walk on it.
- walk on a balance beam: backwards, forward, sideways, turn and bounce. Have children walk slowly because running does not require as much balance.
- bounce - preferably on a trampoline or an old mattress.
- make "angels in the snow": children lie in the snow, move arms and legs, then get up and look at the pattern created. Try some variations on the floor: have them move only one side of their body, then both sides, then one arm and opposite leg; do some quickly and some slowly.

- trace around children's bodies on large pieces of paper. Let the children color or paint in their outlines with colors of the clothes they are wearing that day.
- push an object along a path - such as a wheelbarrow along the edge of the driveway.
- make statues: the leader assumes a pose, then the children imitate.
- step between the rungs of a ladder placed on the ground.
- make all kinds of obstacle courses, indoors and outdoors. Materials can be tires, ladders, barrels, chairs, benches, tables, boxes, trees, mudpuddles - the list is endless. The children can get practice in many kinds of movement as they go over, under, through, and around. Variations can include crawling, creeping, or going backwards through a course.

o There are numerous creative movement activities which you can devise in order to encourage gross motor movement and development, and at the same time encourage creative thinking:

- play a variation of Simon says: "Simon says, 'Be a pencil.'" "Simon says, 'Fly a kite.'"
- play a simplified version of charades: "Guess what I'm doing?"
- use finger plays or pantomime for children to act out various movements along with words or music.
- play "Let's pretend": "Walk like a giant," "Hop like a rabbit."

Small Muscle/Eye Hand Coordination

Fine motor, or small muscle development, refers to the development of the small muscles of the hands and fingers, and their interaction with vision: often referred to as eye-hand coordination.

Following are some ideas for activities and supplies to help fine motor development. Note that in many cases, the best supplies are things you might already have in the house, or things that can be easily and inexpensively obtained.

Clay and playdoh activities are great for developing strength in hands and fingers. They help to develop the sense of touch, and they provide an opportunity for children to experiment and be creative. They also provide the potential for a wide range of difficulty, from pounding and kneading to making intricate creations. You can buy ready-made clay or playdoh, and there are numerous recipes if you want to make your own. Sometimes children might use just hands and fingers, and other times you may want to provide accessories such as a rolling pin, cookie cutters, or a plastic knife.

Water play and sand play help develop motor control, eye hand coordination, and provide an opportunity for experimentation. Pouring helps develop wrist flexibility. For water play, you can use the bathtub, a sink, a wading pool, or a dishpan. Provide different-sized plastic containers, cups, pitchers, squeeze bottles, funnels, strainers, sponges, and then let them go to it. In summer, fill squirter bottles, such as old shampoo or detergent bottles, with water and then squirt to write designs or letters on the driveway. For a winter variation, add a few drops

of food coloring, then squirt on the snow. In a sandbox, try some of the same types of containers just listed plus spoons, shovels, sieves, and colanders. If a sandbox or dirt pile is not available, try a large dishpan or broiler pan of sand or cornmeal (be prepared for some mess if you are doing this indoors). A shallow pan of sand or cornmeal is good for drawing lines, shapes, designs, or letters with a finger. This provides excellent tactile (touch) stimulation in preparation for later writing with tools. Just give the pan a little shake to erase and start again.

Scribbling plays a very important role in the process of learning to use a tool for writing, and in the development of eye-hand coordination. Scribbling should start with large movements of the arm. Chalkboard and chalk, or large sheets of newsprint with pencil or crayon are well suited to this. Be sure to have your children use both arms some of the time. Much research is going on concerning the importance of scribbling, and an interesting finding noted by researcher Rhoda Kellogg is that as children scribble over a period of time, their patterns grow increasingly similar to recognizable handwriting.[8]

In order to provide plenty of opportunity for practice, try to provide lots of writing surfaces and tools for your children. You might check into various sources for cheap supplies of paper: factory rejects or leftovers, newsprint, or try a giant roll purchased from your butcher or bakery. A large chalkboard with plenty of chalk, including different colors, is great. Try chalk on paper with different textures, or chalk on wet paper. Provide pencils, crayons, and non-toxic felt-tipped marking pens, and try surfaces other than paper for variety: fabric, egg cartons, paper towel rolls, wood scraps, sticks, or stones.

Painting is an excellent activity for developing all of the different skills involved in eye-hand coordination. Finger painting is the most basic type of painting. You can buy commercially prepared finger paints, or there are numerous recipes for making your own. In the beginning, especially, concentrate with your child on the process rather than the product: how it feels, watching the hands and fingers move, seeing the lines and designs left behind. Try using a large plastic sheet, old plastic placemats, or other washable surfaces for some of this experimenting. Try finger painting with shaving cream on a table top - especially one that needed a thorough washing! For heightened tactile (touch) and visual stimulation, try adding some texture to the paints: sand, sawdust, or coffee grounds. When you use paper, use large sheets to allow for large movements.

Either tempera paints or watercolors are good for painting with brushes (always be sure the paints are non-toxic). An easel is ideal if you have access to one, but kitchen tables or floors also provide a fine surface under your paper. Try to provide all different sizes, textures, and colors of paper, as well as other kinds of surfaces for painting. In addition to brushes of various sizes, try sponges cut into different shapes and sizes, cotton balls, Q-tips, old toothbrushes, or old roll-on deodorant bottles filled with tempura paint.

Self-help activities are not only good for developing the small muscles and eye-hand coordination, but also help to develop independence and self-confidence. Help your children get practice in doing buttons, snaps, zippers, ties, buckles, and hooks. You can make or buy a doll with oversized buttons, zippers, or other fasteners to do. Or, take a large box and attach various

fasteners on each side: zippers on one side, large buttons and holes on another, and so on. Give your children articles of clothing that are too large and have them fasten layer after layer on top of each other.

Feely boxes or feely bags help children develop their sense of touch. You can put a hole the size of a child's hand in one end of a shoebox, or you can use a paper bag. Fill it with common objects such as a ball, comb, pencil and key; or use various textures such as sandpaper, glass, wood, cotton, or corduroy. Ask your children to reach in, feel one object, describe it, and decide what it is. Another version is to put two of each item inside. As your children remove objects, have them feel for matching objects still inside. Another activity is to have sets of cards: two of each with various textures glued onto them. Children can match the cards together while blindfolded.

Good activities for developing wrist flexibility, which is necessary for later writing, are screwing and unscrewing lids and jars, nuts and bolts, and screws with a screwdriver. If you add various sizes of jars or screws that your children need to match up before screwing, you are also helping to develop visual perception.

In the area of visual perception and discrimination, your children need to learn to discriminate between things that are the same and different. They can start with things that are very different, then learn to identify finer and finer differences. This is an important building block for reading, where children must be able to see differences between letters and words that are quite similar. As an early step in this process, help your children learn the different colors and the basic shapes. Help them pick colors and shapes out of the environment. For example, you can

relieve boredom while waiting in the check-out line at the grocery store: "I see something orange." "Do you see something that's a rectangle?" "What shape is that clock?"

Allow your children to experiment with colors by mixing them, making them lighter or darker, and creating new colors. You can use fingerpaints or tempera, or small containers with water and a few drops of food coloring, added one eye-dropper full at a time.

There are numerous other activities that help develop eye-hand coordination, including:

- cutting, pasting, gluing, punching, folding paper.
- any activities involving mixing, stirring, measuring, and pouring. Baking along with you is great for motor development, number experience, and language development. And, it's fun!
- construction with hammer, nails, saw, and scrap lumber - with close supervision.

Other toys and supplies that are good are things that fit together and take apart such as Lego blocks or Loc Blocs, Tinker Toys, Bristle Blocks, and Lincoln Logs. These provide basic experience in geometry and encourage creativity. Pegs and pegboards, puzzles (you can make your own by pasting a picture onto cardboard, then cutting it into pieces), small metal and plastic cars and a track, blocks, dolls which can be taken apart, dressed, and undressed, spirographs, beads or macaroni for stringing, yarn and sewing cards (you can make your own with cardboard and a hole punch), and ink pads and stamps, are all fun and helpful for developing fine motor skills.

Recommended Reading: Workjobs...For Parents, Growing Child, International Reading Association pamphlets and brochures, Creative Activities for Young Children, Learn at Home the Sesame Street Way.

BEFORE YOUR CHILD READS

A child's readiness to read is based upon the mastery of many prerequisite basic skills discussed in other chapters of this booklet:

- A backlog of experiences. Printed words are meaningless unless children have had enough different experiences to know what the words stand for. So, take walks and study the grass, a tree, or the sky; observe some aspect of nature and talk about it; go to the library, to an airport, to the fire station; take a ride on the bus or a train. The list is endless. But in every case you are increasing your children's background of experiences and building their vocabulary.

- Good language development: good understanding of what words mean, practice in role-playing and imagining, and practice in communicating with adults and other children.

- The ability to distinguish between objects that are the same and different. This starts with objects that are quite different from each other. They gradually must learn to make finer and finer distinctions until finally they are able to distinguish between letters that have the same shape except for their positions, such as p/b/q/d, u/n, or y/h.

- Lots of movement and motor experiences, first to develop their large muscles, then to develop smaller and smaller muscles, until they are ready to coordinate their eyes and fine hand muscles to be able to read and write.

- The ability to hear fine differences in sounds in order to be able to distinguish between different letters and different words.

And, children need to have the self confidence to be ready to try something new.

Probably the one most critical factor, and the one most often overlooked, is interest. Often we do not try to interest our children in reading until after we have tried to teach them to read. According to the International Reading Association, "The children able to profit most from instruction in reading are those who come to school already interested in books. The mechanics of reading instruction may be left to the schools, but school reading lessons can be futile unless the young child is convinced that reading is worth the time and effort. Early, enjoyable experiences with books offer powerful persuasion that reading is worthwhile."[9]

There are a number of things that your family can do to encourage this interest.

First, read aloud to your children. Start when your children are infants with rhymes and simple bright pictures. Your children will experience first hand the magic contained in books. Reading becomes associated with the warm, comfortable feeling of your lap and a happy time for communication.

As your children get older, talk about the pictures, talk about the story, have your children guess what might come next in the story, have them point out objects and details, and have them act out the stories or use puppets - but keep it all fun. Do not make it a test. Try reading to your children at least 15 minutes a day. Even after they become readers themselves, do not underestimate the importance of continuing to read aloud. For excellent information in a very readable book, see Jim Trelease's Read Aloud Handbook. He also includes a long listing of recommended books for reading aloud to children of all ages.

Children who are good readers come from homes where the entire environment supports reading. Not only do the parents read to the children, but the children have plenty of opportunities to see their parents reading to themselves. Parents are the models that children imitate, and children quickly recognize the amount of importance that parents truly place on reading. Children also see the great benefits that their parents get from reading: pleasure from enjoyable reading, information from newspapers, magazines and books, new recipes from cookbooks, or directions on how to do a project.

Take your children to the library. Your local librarian can be a great source of information about books that children like. Let your children see you taking advantage of your library, too.

In addition to the above suggestions to help cultivate interest, there are numerous activities you can do with your children to encourage the development of pre-reading skills.

Use your imagination to come up with pre-reading games wherever you are, whatever you are doing. For example, at the grocery store look with your children for labels that begin with one letter of the alphabet - any letter, but select only one during one shopping trip. Read the labels as you go, point to them, and help your children see and hear the first sound: tomatoes, toothpaste, tangerines, towels. You can play similar sound games in the kitchen, doing the laundry, taking a walk, or taking a drive. Play rhyming games. When your child becomes good at this game, try listening for the ending sounds rather than the beginning.

As your children seem ready and express curiosity, read everything to them: stop signs, cereal boxes, names on stores, magazine titles, everything!

Story-telling is a great reading-related activity. See the Chapter on language development for ideas.

Buy a photo album. Let your children cut pictures from magazines and newspapers and put them into the album. Label them and let your children tell stories about them.

Some excellent ideas for helping your children make their own books are detailed in Growing Child. Take photographs of your children going through their daily routines, or have them draw pictures, then write a caption for each in their own words. Have your children pick a category such as family and friends, animals, flowers, color, funny pictures, or things they like. See Growing Child for details.

Help your children establish the left to right and top to bottom sequence that is required for reading. Whenever you are looking at pictures, naming objects, or counting objects, try to follow this order.

A word of caution about premature formal reading instruction: some children do learn to read early, and that in itself is not a problem if it comes naturally. However, according to Norma Rogers of the International Reading Association, "It is now an established fact that one of the principal causes of poor progress in reading is premature formal instruction."[10] Many children, who simply are not ready to learn to read, experience failure and lose the self-confidence to ever learn to read successfully when they are pushed, whereas they would have done fine if they had just waited a year and experienced success.

According to Growing Child, other children may succeed in learning to read at an early age, but "Research has shown that children who are taught to read at an early age do not maintain their early lead. Instead by age 10 years, later readers have caught up with them and have in many instances surpassed them in reading skill and comprehension."[11]

The distinction here is between the children who learn to read early because they have arrived there on their own, and children who are being pushed, or have structured time each day when a parent sits down with them and teaches them letters, sounds, and syllables. Do feel free to answer your children's questions about sounds, letters, words - as they are ready. The key here is to make the information available, but to let your children take the lead in showing you how much they want and are ready to absorb.

In Summary

Remember that there are numerous skills that must be developed before children are ready to read. Children's interest must be captured so that they will want to read. You can devise numerous games and activities to help develop reading related skills, but keep them fun and interesting. Avoid premature formal instruction.

For more information, see: Workjobs...For Parents, A Parent's Gift, Parents: A Beacon for Maine's Children, Growing Child, IRA pamphlets and brochures, Learn at Home the Sesame Street Way, The Read Aloud Handbook.

NUMBERS

In order to assure a good solid background for math, provide lots of opportunities for active and concrete experimentation, observation, and experience. Numbers, measurement, addition, subtraction - all of these concepts are meaningless unless children first can connect them to objects that they can see, feel, and move around.

Following are some of the basic concepts children need to develop, and some ideas for activities to help them along. Remember, as much as possible, let your children do the experimenting and the discovering. You might be on hand to provide some of the vocabulary to label their discoveries, but try to avoid "teaching" as such. Keep the sessions in line with your children's attention spans (not too long), and keep them fun!

To provide basic opportunities for measurement, experimentation, and observation, nothing beats either the sandbox or a small wading pool. Substitutes are a large pan or dishpan filled with water, or a dishpan of sand, cornmeal, or grits - great activities for a day you were planning to wash the floor anyway! Supply your children with containers of various sizes, such as measuring cups, shovels, spoons, funnels, and sieves, and let your children take it from there.

Children need to learn to make quantitative (amount) comparisons visually, and also need to learn the words to describe the relationship of one item to another (large, small, long, short, big, little). Activities to help develop these include the ordering of any objects by size or height. For very young children there are some inexpensive toys you can buy to focus on this skill. One is a set of nesting cups: a series of cups, each one slightly larger than the next. Put together one

way, they nest inside each other. Put together the other way, they build a tower. Another toy is rings that fit on a stick: each ring is slightly smaller than the previous one. Measuring spoons or measuring cups can also be used.

Toys that tap into the same thought process can easily be made of wooden dowels, drinking straws, or paper towel rolls cut into different lengths. Let your children experiment with placement in order to line them up by size, then allow them to check their own accuracy. You might help them observe the differences and supply some of the descriptive terms. Another variation of the same idea is to fill a series of identical jars or glasses with different levels of colored water. Your children can place these in order either by increasing or decreasing amount.

Set up some activities to help your child develop a sense of what is called 1 to 1 correspondence: the idea that one item corresponds with one other item, or that one number corresponds to one item. This is necessary before your child can count. Have your child place one finger puppet on each block (be sure to have a matching number of each, such as 5 finger puppets for 5 blocks); place one piece of cheese on each cracker; put one button into each hollow of an egg carton; give one apple to each child; or more advanced, put one plate, spoon, fork, glass, and napkin on each placemat.

Help your children learn to count by rote - first, one through ten, and then higher.

Then start counting everything: parts of the body as you get dressed (one leg, two legs; one hand, two hands); peas as you eat them; butterflies, flowers, whatever you see; blocks as you drop them into their container; fire whistles as you hear them; or stairs as you climb them,

everything. A lot of learning takes place between counting by rote, and actually counting objects, or being able to assign a number to each object.

After your children have learned to identify the names of numbers, help them match these numbers with the correct number of dots or objects. For instance, take any small container, write a numeral on it and have a child place the corresponding number of objects into it (pennies, buttons, paper clips - any small object will do). See Workjobs... for Parents for a number of good, easy to make activities.

An activity which provides background skills for geometry is block building. Provide your child with an assortment of boxes and blocks of all sizes for valuable experiences in balance and symmetry.

Take advantage of opportunities for dealing with measurement by comparing weights. Compare the number of scoops of sand it takes to fill various containers. Feel the weights of any two objects to determine which is heavier. A simple set of scales (preferably the balancing kind) and a collection of objects provide for experiences to measure and compare.

Show your children how to measure with a ball of string then make comparisons of length of objects throughout the house.

Growing Child suggests an activity which provides concrete experience with fractions. Cut round cardboard discs or paper plates into sections. Leave one whole, cut one into halves, and one into quarters. Allow your child to experiment and discover the various relationships of parts to wholes. You might offer some of the vocabulary to describe the relationships, such as whole, half, or quarters, but avoid the temptation to "teach."

An ideal way to develop a number of methematical concepts, as well as other skills, is through cooking. It involves motor development, sensory input, intellectual development, language development, and it's fun! Mathematically, cooking provides first-hand experience in measuring, counting, adding, subtracting, fractions, and amounts. Very young children can scoop flour into a measuring cup, dump it into the bowl, count the number of cups you need, count the eggs as they break them, stir, and so forth. The more you can let them help and actually handle the materials and ingredients, the more they can learn from it.

Teach your children the names of the various coins: penny, nickel, dime, and quarter. As they are ready, help them to understand the value of each (for example, a nickel is the same as five pennies).

For more information, see Teaching Mathematics: What Is Basic?, and for excellent specific arithmetic readiness activities using materials you have on hand or can purchase inexpensively, see Workjobs ...For Parents, Growing Child, and Learn at Home the Sesame Street Way.

THINKING SKILLS

For the sake of organization and order, this booklet has been divided into chapters. But children do not learn isolated skills. All learning overlaps and is interrelated. Thinking skills include many skills that are discussed in other chapters on visual perception, learning to read, math concepts, and language development. This chapter focuses on a few special thinking skills not covered elsewhere, including discrimination, comparison, categorizing, sorting, sequencing, sciencing, creating, and imagining.

A skill that children develop quite early is the ability to recognize when two objects are the same and when they are different. As they refine this ability, they learn to compare objects and they learn to organize things into groups according to various characteristics. This sorting, or classification, is one of the most important intellectual processes which children develop during these early years. It is one of the ways in which we all make order and sense out of our world.

Very conveniently, sorting is something that adults do all day long, and there are plenty of opportunities to involve your children in these regular daily routines. There are also many fun games which you can devise to provide experiences in sorting.

An example of a sorting game is to provide blocks, buttons, spools, or other small objects. Use items that are quite different for inexperienced children, and objects that are more similar to each other for children who have had more experience with this. Apple crate separators, egg cartons, or muffin tins make good containers with built-in compartments. A young child might put all the rocks in one section, the beads in another, and the buttons in another. A more experienced child might be given only buttons, and will discriminate

size, color, style, texture, material, or the number of holes. Encourage your children to come up with their own categories for sorting the objects. As your children work, you can help by providing the vocabulary to describe the likenesses and the differences.

Notice likenesses and differences in everything that you do: whether you are taking a walk and noticing the birds or trees or leaves; reading a book and comparing pictures, letters, words; or eating a meal and comparing textures, tastes, and smells. Pick out any two objects and ask how they are different. Ask how they are alike. Make it a game.

More difficult classification requires children to sort items that are somehow related (such as a needle and thread, or a lock and key), to sort items according to their function, or to sort animals according to where they live.

Children can take part in many routine household sorting jobs, such as grocery shopping, setting the table, or arranging books according to size, topic, or color. Putting food away calls for some sorting: "Put all of the canned goods on this shelf, the items to be refrigerated on the table, and the boxed goods on the counter." Picking up is a sorting job: "Put the building blocks in their bucket, the Loc Blocs in their bucket, the crayons in the shoe box, the dirty clothes in the hamper, and the trash in the wastebasket." Laundry sorting is a great job that can be adapted to all levels: "Make separate piles of the shirts, the socks, and the towels." Or, "Match the socks into pairs, put all of your clothes into one pile, and the baby's clothes into another."

Sequencing is another important thinking skill. Cut up a comic strip, then let your children put it in order. Or let them put the pieces of a story in order. Think about the sequencing of everyday activities. Play games that involve thinking about what one would do first, then second, and so on, until last. For example, have your children plan out all the steps involved in going on a trip, packing a suitcase, and so forth. Try acting out a sequence of events and leaving out first one part and then more parts.

Other activities that involve the concept of time are also important. Talk about time - time to get up, time to eat, time to play, time for Sesame Street, or time to sleep. "Yesterday we played at your friend's house, today we are going shopping, and tomorrow we will go to Granny's house." Use a calender to help your children anticipate special days, such as birthdays, trips, visits, or holidays. Help your children see that seasons tell the time of year through involving them in seasonal preparations such as getting the house ready for winter, getting ready for spring, or planting the garden.

Another important thinking skill could be called sciencing. This describes the way children, like scientists, actively try to make sense out of their world through exploring, manipulating, comparing, making theories, making mistakes, and then improving their theories. This is one more area that comes naturally to children: they do not have to be taught. As parents you can do much to promote and support this kind of learning. You can provide flexible raw materials, and oppor- tunities for your children to experiment, make some theories and try them out on their own. You can be on hand as a consultant to discuss your children's discov- eries, to answer questions, or in some cases to turn the questions back to your children ("what do you think?") in order to provoke further thinking.

Some materials that are good for encouraging exploration and experimentation are:

- a container of water (swimming pool, bathtub, sink, or dishpan) and small containers, some that hold water and some that leak (like a sieve or strainer).
- a container of water and a collection of objects, some that will float, and others that will sink (sticks, popsicle sticks, feathers, nails, leaves, stones, egg shells).
- gardens - indoors and out
- a large magnet and a collection of objects, some of which will be attracted, and some not.
- a magnifying glass and a tray full of different objects
- small containers with colors to mix (either water with drops of food coloring, or tempera paints)

One of the most important thinking areas is imagination and creativity. Creativity can be defined as the ability to combine two previously unrelated ideas. Typically, children have great natural potential in this area, but all too often we train it out of them. It is an ability that flourishes if we allow it to, but it is easily stifled if we as adults do too much directing.

In order to best encourage creativity, parents might once again view their role as being that of a helper rather than a teacher. Recent psychological studies are showing us that when too much formal direction is given from adults, it hinders children in their ability to come up with creative non-standard approaches to situations.[13] The best approach for parents to take is to provide the raw materials, a supportive environment, plenty of opportunities for children to be creative, and then to step back and let the children take the lead.

The very difficult part for parents (and teachers, too) is to be able to contribute and support without supervising or intruding. It can be a hard distinction to make.

Creativity is involved in all areas of children's learning (see the chapters on language development, small muscle development, and large motor development for creative activities as they apply to these areas). Following are a few sample activities that show how creativity can be encouraged in such widely ranging areas as problem solving, art projects, pretending, and dramatic play.

An excellent game is "What If?". Questions can cover an entire range of subjects and purposes, such as imagination: "What if you could fly?" "What if you were a purple elephant?"; values: "What if you saw a friend stealing?; those requiring some sensitivity: "What if you were deaf?"; and creative problem solving: "What if there were a fire?" or other imaginary scenes that could help prepare for danger or threatening situations.

All sorts of art projects tap into creativity. The best ones are those where you provide raw materials such as paper, paste, dried beans, dried peas, water colors, clay, or crayons and just let your children create. Add some music and let them make creations to show how the music makes them feel.

Provide something as simple as boxes: all shapes and sizes. Let the children do the rest.

There are all sorts of props you can provide to encourage pretending or dramatic play: small cars, trucks, and other vehicles; dollhouse people and furniture; child-sized sinks, refrigerators, stoves; utensils, dishes, pots and pans; empty food

containers and things to cook; dolls, stuffed animals, doll beds, baby bottles, clothes, diapers; toy telephones, briefcases, dress-up clothes; doctor or hospital kits.

In Summary

No one has to teach children how to be creative - it comes automatically. We, as parents, might instead think in terms of how we can better allow and encourage it. This encouragement of imaginative and creative thinking applies to all of the various areas of learning discussed in this booklet. It requires faith on the part of parents that their children can do things on their own, and can come up with unique ideas and non-conventional but worthwhile ways of doing things or using objects. Parents must be willing to step back and let creativity grow without too much interference or directing.

Recommended reading: Workjobs..For Parents, Growing Child, Bubbles Rainbows and Worms: Science Experiments for Pre-school Children, How Can I Get My Child Ready to Read?, How Can I Help My Child Build Positive Attitudes Toward Reading?, Creative Activities for Young Children, Learn at Home the Sesame Street Way.

Parting Thoughts

You as a parent are very important in your children's learning. Your involvement with your children now and throughout their school years will have a tremendous impact.

Do not feel that you have to be a teacher. Try to provide an environment with potential for exploration, then let your children do the exploring, the experimenting, and the learning. Encourage your children to do things on their own and in their own ways. Take advantage of ordinary, everyday family and household situations for learning potential. Above all, try to feel good about yourself as a parent, and help your children feel good about themselves as individuals.

Recommended Readings

Most of the books in this bibliography can be found at your local bookstore or your public library. If not, try ordering through your local bookstore, or write directly to the publisher.

A few exceptions are the following:

Growing Child. This is a monthly publication with information which corresponds to your child's age (birth through 6 years). It contains excellent developmental information and activities. Write to 22 North Second Street, P.O. Box 620, Lafayette, Indiana 47902 for subscription information. A monthly issue of Growing Parent accompanies it.

The International Reading Association puts out a very informative series of free brochures and 50¢ pamphlets geared toward parents. Write to IRA, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19711.

"What Books and Records Should I Get for My Preschooler?"
"How Can I Help My Child Build Positive Attitudes toward Reading?"
"What Is Reading Readiness?"
"How Can I Help My Child Get Ready to Read?"
"How Can I Encourage My Primary Grade Child to Read?"
"How Can I Get My Teenager to Read?"
"How Can I Help My Child Learn to Read English as a Second Language?"
"Why Read Aloud to Children?"
"How Does My Child's Vision Affect His Reading?"

Free brochures (send a #10 self-addressed, stamped envelope. Requests for four or more titles should be accompanied by first class postage for two ounces):

"Your Home Is Your Child's First School"
"You Can Encourage Your Child to Read"
"Good Books Make Reading Fun For Your Child"
"Summer Reading Is Important"
"You Can Use Television to Stimulate Your Child's Reading Habits"
"Studying: A Key to Success...Ways Parents Can Help"
"You Can Help Your Child in Reading by Using the Newspaper"
"Eating Well Can Help Your Child Learn Better"

Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the National Education Association Order Department, The Academic Building, Saw Mill Road, West Haven, Connecticut 06516 to receive either of the following free pamphlets:

"Talking With Your Child,"
stock #5148-3-00

"Reading: Parents Can Help,"
stock #5123-8-00

Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the National Council of Teachers Order Department, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801 for the free pamphlet:

> "How To Help Your Child Become a Better Writer: Suggestions for Parents from the National Council of Teachers of English"

An excellent booklet entitled, Teaching Mathematics: What Is Basic? is available for $2.00 through the Council for Basic Education, 725 15th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Footnotes

[1] Growing Child: Birth-Age 6. Lafayette, Indiana: Dunn and Hargitt, Inc.

[2] Birckmayer, Jennifer. Discipline...Is Not a Dirty Word: A Workshop Outline for Parents, Teachers, and Caregivers of Young Children. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Media Services, 1982, p. 2.

[3] Birckmayer, p. 14.

[4] Osborn, D. Keith, "Disciplinary Climate More Important Than Technique." M. Edwards, Virginia North, Kleckner, Nancy E., and Harland, C. Lynn, eds. Growing Child Research Review, Vol. II, no. 1 (September, 1983), pp. 1-2.

[5] Growing Child, "Four Years."

[6] Carol Copple, "Learning Language," Sesame Street Parents' Newsletter, Vol. I, no. 6 (August, 1981), p. 5.

[7] Copple, p. 5.

[8] Growing Child, "Five Years Three Months."

[9] Glenna Davis Sloan, Good Books Make Reading Fun for Your Child (1977).

[10] Norma Rogers, What Is Reading Readiness? (1971).

[11] Growing Child, "Four Years Two Months."

[12] Growing Child, "Five Years One Month."

[13] Jocelyn Gunnar Stevenson, "Sand and Cake: Encourage Your Child's Creativity," Sesame Street Parents' Newsletter, Vol. I, no. 1 (March, 1981), P. 4.

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